A MESSAGE FROM THE COEUR D'ALENE RIVER RANGER DISTRICT

Placer Resource Area

November 2003

An Introduction to the Area

Early last spring, a team of resource specialists at the Coeur d'Alene River Ranger District began looking at an area extending from Big Creek drainage to Lookout Pass (Figure 3, next page).

After going through a "coarse filter" look at the area, the team was able to narrow our focus to the areas most in need of rehabilitation or change, which were located in the Placer Creek watershed (please refer to the maps on page 2). Conditions in the watershed were largely affected by the 1910 fire and associated timber salvage, mining, and early settlement.

Through a standard approach called "Environmental Analysis at the Watershed Scale" (EAWS), we identified what information we had, and what information was needed.

We gathered that information over the summer (for example, through field surveys or data collection).

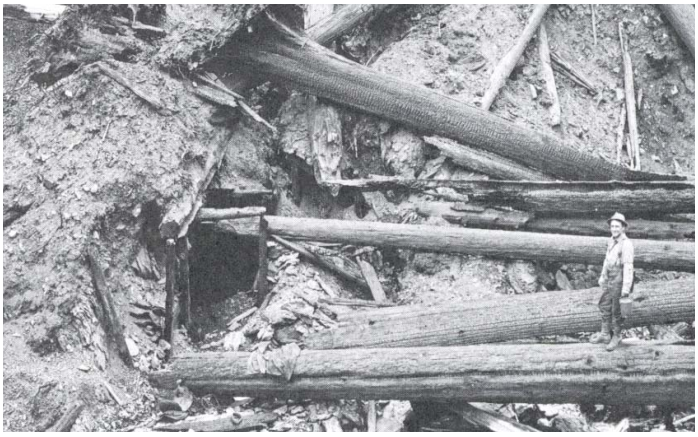


Figure 1 (above): The site of Ranger Ed Pulaski's famous run down the West Fork of Placer Creek to the War Eagle mine, where he held his crew of 40 men at gunpoint in order to save their lives.

Figure 2 (below): The West Fork of Placer Creek after the 1910 fire.

This fall, our team met to evaluate resource conditions and trends found in the area. We then compared those conditions both to what occurred in the past and to the desired conditions for the area in the future.

This helped us to identify issues of concern and to start developing a management strategy.

An important step in developing the strategy is to hear from you — your knowledge of the area, how and when you use the area, and what types of management you would like to see for the Placer Creek Watershed.

Land Ownership Patterns

Ownership in the 10,000-acre area was highly influenced by development of mining claims during settlement. Private land occurs in the lowlands near communities, and continues up the slope with what once were mining claims but were later patented and are now private land. Among the patented mining claims are irregular parcels under the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Further up the drainages are large tracts of National Forest System lands with a few small private parcels.

Key concerns identified during our initial assessment include:

- ◊ Vegetative health
- ◊ Fire risk to communities
- ◊ Domestic water supplies
- ◊ Wildlife habitat
- ◊ Recreation

A brief discussion of each is provided in the following pages.

Shoshone County

Placer Resource Area

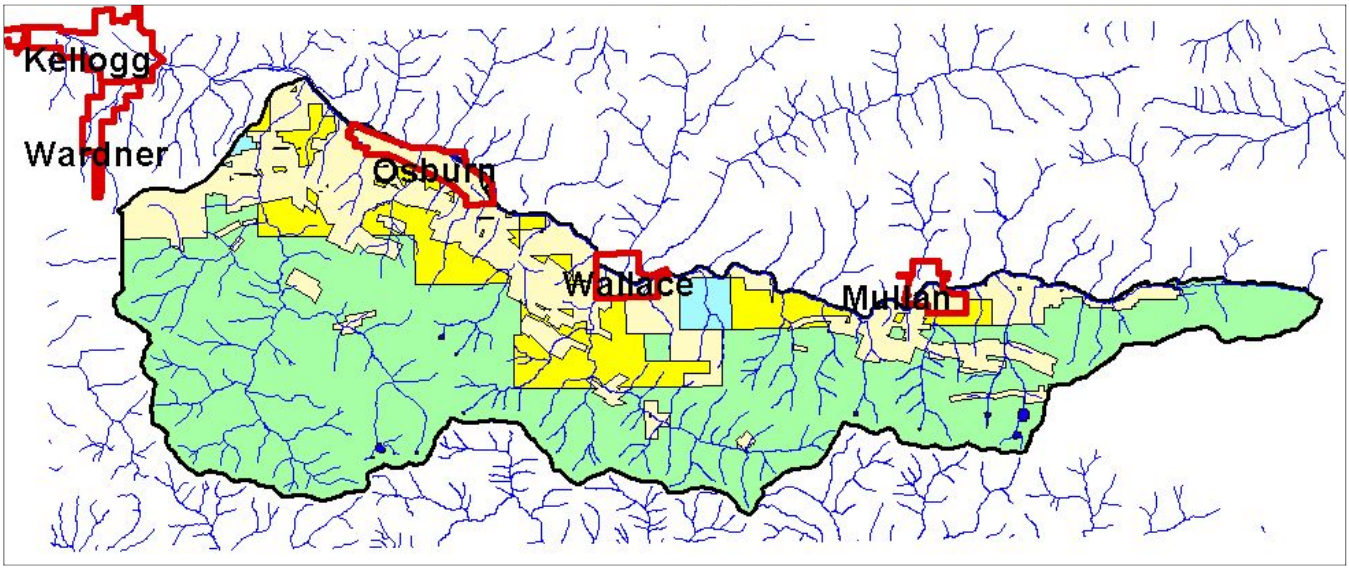
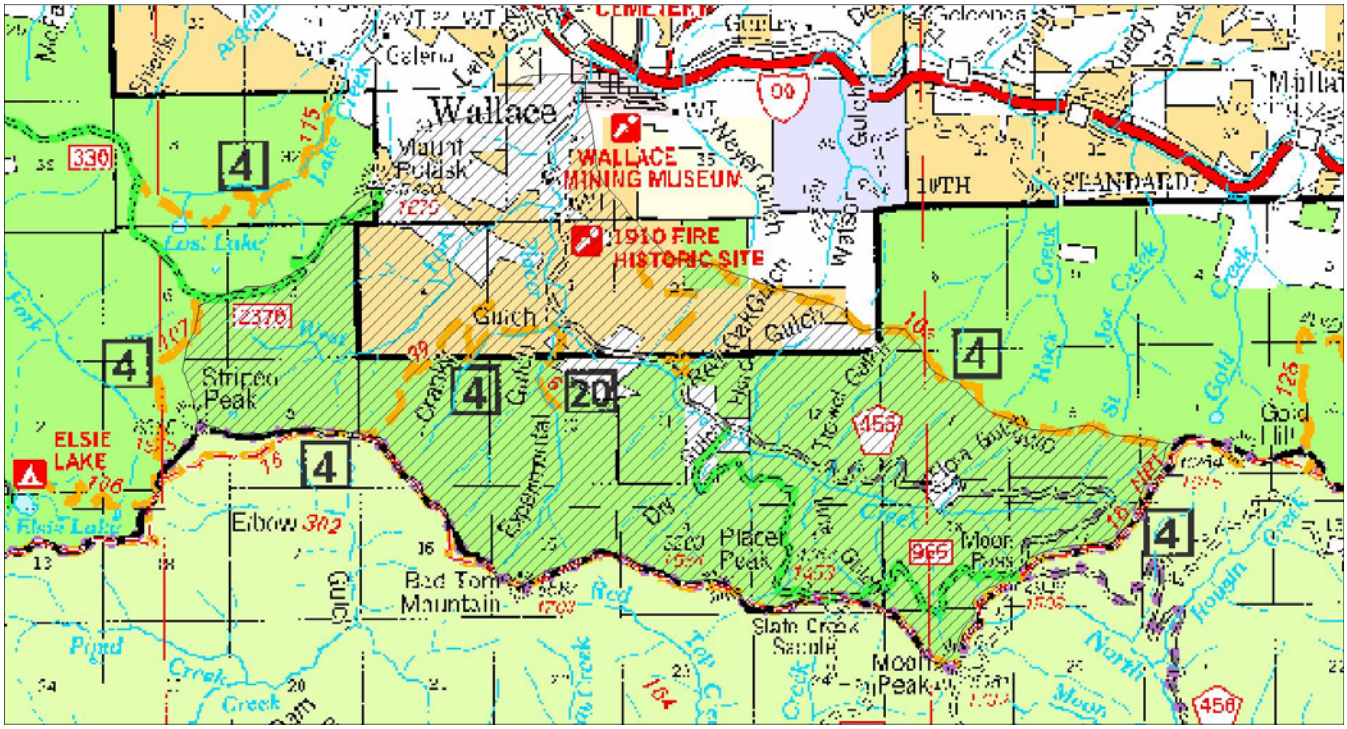


Figure 3. The original area of consideration extended from the South Fork Coeur d'Alene River on the north, the Montana/Idaho border on the east, the St. Joe/Coeur d'Alene Divide on the south, and the Big Creek/Pine Creek Divide on the west.

Figure 4. Further evaluation helped narrow our focus to the Placer Creek watershed (shown with hatching, below)



Risk to Communities

Based on the lay of the land, wind patterns, and past history, a large, wind-driven fire (even one much smaller than the 1910 fire) could seriously threaten the communities of Osburn, Wallace and Mullan, as well as many other homes and businesses scattered throughout the area.

Fire history in northern Idaho shows such fires have a characteristic northeasterly spread—a fire starting in the Placer Creek watershed could quickly cover the miles to these communities.

Shoshone County recently developed a wildfire mitigation plan that recognized the threat wildfires pose to the domestic watersheds of the county, and recommended management that would decrease this risk.

An Important Source for Domestic Water

The East Shoshone County Water District serves the communities of Wallace, Silverton and in Burke Canyon up to Woodland Park with water from Placer Creek. Primary intakes are located on Placer Creek and Experimental Draw, with backup intakes on the West Fork of Placer Creek and Cranky Gulch.

The East Shoshone Water District also serves the community of Mullan, which uses Boulder Creek as an unfiltered backup water source that is maintained to be used in an emergency.

Aquatic restoration activities could include upgrading structures that are currently barriers to resident fish populations in Placer Creek, as well as improving and stabilizing road prisms, while providing additional drainage where needed.

Rare Furbearers

Based on sightings within the last five years, we know that gray wolves, wolverine, lynx and fisher are present in or travel through the watershed. In addition to protecting their habitat, there are opportunities to improve wildlife habitat — for example, through prescribed burning in tall, old brush fields (which would improve browse habitat) or through regenerating old lodgepole stands to young stands, which would provide better habitat for lynx.

Diverse Recreation Opportunities

The watershed and surrounding areas provide for a wide variety of recreational activities, some of which include snowmobiling, ATV and motorcycle use, camping, fishing, hunting, and scenic driving.

A Long-Term Transportation Plan

A long-term transportation plan will be developed in conjunction with this project, identifying access needs for the area over the next several decades. Key objectives of the transportation plan are to:

- *Ensure long-term access is provided for vegetation management and stand-tending needs*
- *Ensure sufficient vehicle access to major ridges is maintained for wildfire attack and control*
- *Ensure access is maintained for a variety of recreation uses*
- *Identify the opportunities to reduce the amount of fill in the flood plains (to provide for more natural hydrologic function), and*
- *Identify culverts that are not functioning properly, and the options to reduce environmental impacts caused by those culverts).*

Forest Vegetation on the Decline

Due to the devastation of the 1910 fire, there is little old growth in the Placer Creek watershed. The project silviculturist is most concerned with stands that are comprised of certain species (such as lodgepole pine and western larch) that are approaching an age where they will succumb to wind, insects, disease, and fire.

For example, there are a couple of stands identified as "geriatric" lodgepole by the project silviculturist. Conducting a regeneration harvest and allowing the stands to grow back as lodgepole and larch would make for a healthier stand with less fire risk (some planting may be needed). In addition, young lodgepole are beneficial to lynx habitat.

There are also some stands of western larch that are approaching the 80 to 100-year mark. These stands could be improved through thinning, "daylighting" harvests, or regeneration harvests in conjunction with tree planting, as well as the use of prescribed burning.

Shrub fields in the area have become decadent, with tall, old brush. The use of prescribed burning in these shrub fields would reduce the amount of fuel as well as the rate of spread and intensity of a potential wildfire.

Harvest activities would create a mosaic of different forest successional stages that would help disrupt the spread of an uncontrolled wildfire. These areas could then act as fuel breaks in the event of a fire driven by frontal winds. In addition, the shrub fields would provide better wildlife browse after burning.

These accomplishments would help reduce fire severity, intensity and size, and in so doing protect communities, domestic watersheds

In the coming months...

Our process is guided by many laws, regulations and policies, but primarily by the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA. Although there are some variations, the NEPA process usually involves the following steps:

→*Data and information gathering*

→ ***"Scoping"*** *(to gather information, concerns, and ideas from the public, other agencies, and other agency specialists)*

→*Identification of issues and concerns that will need addressed*

→*Development of a reasonable range of alternatives to address the issues, including a "No Action" alternative*

→*Analysis of alternatives and documentation of our findings*

→*Public review of our documentation*

→*Response to public input (for example, through changing the proposed activities or their implementation)*

→*Issuing a written decision to notify the public which course of action (or no action) has been selected for implementation.*

Depending on the level of activities selected for implementation, a decision will be issued either by District Ranger Joe Stringer or by Forest Supervisor Ranotta McNair.

Project Team Will Cover All Aspects Key to Decision

The team assigned to this project is made up of several District specialists, with assistance from resource specialists in the Forest Supervisor's office and, when needed, the Regional Office in Missoula. The primary team consists of:

Project Team Leader: A forester by trade, Sherri Lionberger is the Project Team Leader. She will be glad to answer questions or arrange for a meeting with your organization to discuss the project.

Fire/Fuels Specialist: Sarah Jerome will be key in designing alternatives that include prescribing burning or other fuels reduction activities, and will conduct the fire/fuels analysis.

Silviculturist: As a silviculturist, Joyce Stock will provide information related to forest vegetation needs in designing management alternatives and will conduct the forest vegetation analysis.

Aquatics: The aquatics crew spent much of the summer in the Placer Creek area, and have gathered a substantial amount of road, stream, and fisheries information. Hydrologist by trade, Rob Davies is also the Staff Officer for the Aquatics Shop at the District. He will have the assistance of John Ruebke, a hydrologic technician, in conducting aquatics effects analysis. Identification of habitat improvement and the analysis of effects to fish and their habitat will be conducted by fisheries biologist Matt Davis.

Wildlife: Providing adequate habitat for species of the area is an integral part of alternative design. The analysis of effects to wildlife species and their habitat will be conducted by biologist Gail Worden.

Botany: District botanist Val Goodnow will analyze effects to rare plants, as well as the noxious weeds situation in the project area. Surveys were conducted in the area over the summer, but no new populations were found.

Soils: The identification of sensitive soils and effects analysis will be conducted by Carl Ritchie, with the assistance of the Forest Soils Scientist.

Recreation and Scenery: As Recreation Staff Officer, Jack Dorrell will conduct both analyses to ensure .

Transportation: Identification of the existing road system, completion of the Roads Analysis Process, and development of a long-term transportation plan for the area will be accomplished by Engineering Staff Officer Thane Syverson.

Mapping and Database support will be provided by GIS Specialist Ralph Shepard and Database Coordinator Jackie McGillivray.

We'd like to hear from you!

For more information on the Placer project, please contact

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Additional information is also available at the Idaho Panhandle National Forests' website:

www.fs.fed.us / ipnf / eco / manage / nepa